

## **Europe's night trains making a comeback; Once threatened, travel method is gaining renewed interest with new routes, carriages**

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### **Body**

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From the Orient Express to the Trans-Europe Express, few methods of travel have offered as much romance as a European night train.

Unfortunately, these overnight train routes have long been in decline, particularly in Western Europe, due to the growing popularity of budget airlines.

In 2016, the German rail operator Deutsche Bahn ended all of its night routes, selling off the entirety of its sleeping wagons, while in France, the last Paris-to-Nice sleeping train service was discontinued in 2017.

As a result, fans of overnight rail travel have been fighting to save the service. The cross-border Back on Track group has been lobbying both operators and governments..

Things have started to look up, with new routes, new carriages and renewed interest from travellers. Austria's ÖBB purchased Deutsche Bahn's unwanted sleeping wagons, and has since reported high numbers of overnight passengers, even ordering new sleeping cars set to enter service by 2023.

In March, the Swedish government announced plans to expand overnight trains to many European destinations.

In May, the Swiss rail operator SBB said that it was considering renewed night routes, citing market demands.

In France, activists saved a beloved sleeping-car route between Paris, Perpignan and the Spanish border town of Portbou, according to Nicolas Forien, a member of both Back on Track and the French group Oui au Train de Nuit (Yes to the Night Train).

"Public opinion is changing compared to a few years ago, when night trains were considered old-fashioned and nostalgic, something from the past," Forien said.

"Now it's considered a serious alternative to flying that should be redeveloped."

Sleeper train service has had better luck in other parts of the Continent - often in regions with less competition from budget airlines.

The Czech train operator RegioJet introduced a new overnight line in 2017 with all-new cars travelling from Prague through Slovakia's High Tatra Mountains and to the regional capital of Kosice.

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The route was later extended further east to the city of Humenne. In late 2018, ÖBB launched a new version of the historic Vienna to Berlin overnight route, now travelling through Wrocław and other cities in southwestern Poland. And the Serbian rail operator Srbija Voz has recently modernized the couchettes on its overnight trains.

But by far, the highest-profile night train is the new Caledonian Sleeper, which offers luxurious sleeping cars for journeys between London and various destinations in Scotland, with upgraded features like ensuite lavatories and double beds, as well as improved options for dining. (The Caledonian Sleeper appeared on Travel's 52 Places to Go in 2019 list.)

While more comfortable furnishings and better meals might heighten the romantic allure of night trains, concern for the environment is giving the movement a significant push. Earlier this year, the climate activist Greta Thunberg completed a cross-European speaking tour by train, which helped bring the Swedish concept of flygskam, or "flight shame," to a wider audience. In one Twitter post, Thunberg posted a picture of herself smiling from an upper bunk of night train.

"The most important thing for me these days is the climate discussion, because they are really climate-friendly alternatives to middle-distance flying," Bernhard Knierim, an activist with Back on Track, said of trains. For Knierim, the optimal distance for overnight rail travel is "anything up to 1,000 kilometres."

In terms of environmental impact, the difference between rail travel and flights can be substantial. Robert Lechner, a spokesman for the ÖBB rail carrier, points out that Austria's electrified overnight trains do not require fossil fuels.

"In Austria, for example, the electricity for the trains comes from 100 per cent renewable sources," Lechner said. "In terms of geography, we have a lot of advantages. We have the power plants on the Danube River, and we have the power plants in the mountains."

Not only do night trains allow travellers to avoid the guilt of flygskam, but train travel can also be productive, thanks to the on-board Wi-Fi that many night trains offer for free. For most travellers, however, the main "productive" time will be spent sleeping. They are also cost effective: these trains eliminate the need for booking a night of accommodation.

Al Mik, 32, frequently travels around Europe in his job with a Brussels-based non-governmental organization, taking night trains instead of flying.

Train travel takes longer than flying, but sometimes it's more convenient, Mik said.

"There's something really great about waking up and being dumped off in the centre of the place you're travelling to, instead of 20 or 30 kilometres out, as you are with most flights," he said.

## Classification

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